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## **Bartow to be one of first counties to receive new voting machines**

By JAMES SWIFT

On Wednesday, Gov. Brian Kemp signed House Bill 316 into law, a sweeping piece of legislation that will replace Georgia's voting system with new "paper-backed" equipment.

While there are still some questions about what the new system will resemble — and how much the cost of replacing the state's older voting machines will ultimately run — one thing is for certain: when the new system does arrive, Bartow County will be among the first in the state to experience it.

"We have been selected to be one of the first counties to get the voting system," Bartow County Elections Supervisor Joseph Kirk said. "We're one of 12 that's going to pilot it this November, so we'll be getting ours probably August, September, somewhere in that timeframe."

The law, initially proposed by State Rep. Barry Fleming (R-Harlem), seeks to "provide for uniform election equipment in the State" and "to provide for ballot-marking devices and standards and procedures for such devices."

Kirk said those ballot-marking devices are quite similar to the equipment Bartow County voters have been using for several years. The only difference is that the new machines will print voters' selections onto "a ballot of record," which will then be electronically scanned.

"Which brand we're going to get, I have no idea," Kirk said. "They have just put the [requests for proposals] out from the State, and of course, that's a closed bidding process and no one knows what they're going to do until the completion of it."

While Gov. Kemp's proposed State budget includes about \$150 million to cover the costs of the new voting system, at this point Kirk said no one is sure how much the total



investment will actually be. And although Kirk said the machines don't represent an "unfunded mandate," he also said he expects the new equipment to saddle Bartow County with several ongoing maintenance and material costs.

"With a purchase this size, we're counting on the Secretary of State to negotiate it so it's a good price, both for the initial purchase as well as any additional equipment we have to buy moving forward," he said. "Until that negotiation happens, we really don't know what they're going to cost — I know what the off the shelf costs are for the piece of equipment, but I hope we don't pay full sticker price."

In the wake of a gubernatorial election cycle fraught with allegations of malfunctioning equipment and accusations of outright voter suppression, Kirk said the move to the new voting system is primarily about restoring public confidence.

"I trust our current system and I've never had any reason to think that it did not count every vote properly the way it was intended by the voter," he said. "That being said, it's hard to convince people to just take your word for it ... with a paper trail, we can audit the results after the election and not have to say 'Trust us, it was right.' You can see for yourself these are the correct results."

While Kirk said he understands the public's concerns over voting technology — indeed, he's traveling to Denver later this month to speak with federal officials at a cybersecurity conference — he said he's not worried about the new system keeping votes secure.

"One of the nice things about the newer voting systems is that it's easier to test them and insure there is no malicious code on the device," he said. "They do what is called 'hashCode testing' and things of that nature to really make sure that there's nothing that's been introduced into the software that could affect the results, or even been introduced at all."

Prior to Bartow even receiving its first machines, Kirk said the devices will go through several levels of rigorous testing.

"Before we ever see anything, it's going to be tested multiple times," he said. "It'll be tested by the vendor as part of their quality assurance process, it's going to be tested by the State as part of the certification process — it's called 'acceptance testing' at the State-

level — but once we get it we will test it before we ever use it on Election Day to make sure it is in fact functioning properly.”

The new law, however, encompasses much more than just voting machines. The bill signed by Kemp last week also makes changes to how the State processes absentee ballot applications, in addition to providing new procedures for voters to contest absentee ballots which are initially rejected.

While the law has many moving pieces, so to speak, Kirk said most of the other changes are simply attempts to “clean up the code to take care of some problems” that were identified in 2018’s election cycle.

“They made a big effort through the legislative process to address the concerns that were raised as part of our gubernatorial election last year,” Kirk said. “I guess my favorite part of the bill for those things are the lifting of the restrictions on absentee ballots and making it easier to get those in and giving them a procedure in the law in case that we reject a ballot, to come in and correct that issue.”

And there’s one often overlooked voting bloc that Kirk said he believes will greatly benefit from those changes.

“That’s one we don’t talk about much, but there are a lot of people who are incarcerated who have not lost their right to vote,” he said. “If you’re incarcerated on a misdemeanor conviction or if it’s a first offender thing on a felony conviction, you haven’t lost your right to vote. But if you’re in jail it was very hard to get you a ballot, and [the new law] makes this very easy, so that’s a great change.”

The law also makes a few changes to how local-level election boards function — which Kirk said he certainly welcomes.

“These times of transition are the perfect opportunity to make things better and try to address some procedural issues we may have had in the past, address the paperwork and make sure it’s easy for the voters and my poll workers to use,” he said. “There’s really some great things that could happen as part of this transition.”



Ultimately, Kirk said he expects Bartow County to have all of its new voting equipment operational and online before 2020.

“We’ll start educating the community [this summer], and then we’ll get the remainder of ours, as well as everything else going out across the state, towards the end of the year, probably,” he said.

While the new law directly addresses some of the most contentious aspects of 2018’s election — among others, it bars county registrars from rejecting absentee ballots due to “mismatched” signatures and prevents counties from changing polling locations within 60 days of a general, primary or runoff election, barring emergencies — concerns still linger about the State’s voting procedures.

The American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against four Georgia counties last month for “failing to provide sufficient resources to provide enough polling places, voting machines and staff to run a proper high-turnout election.” The same month, the United States House Committee on Oversight and Reform announced it was launching an investigation of the State’s voting system, alleging the Secretary of State’s Office cancelled voter registration for more than 600,000 people in 2017 and placed the registration applications of more than 50,000 people on hold in 2018.

While Kirk said he believes it’s impossible to fix all of the State’s woes in a single legislative session, he nonetheless said he believes the new law is a major step forward for Georgia’s voting system.

“We can’t address every issue, every concern, in one piece of legislation,” he said, “but this does a great job of moving us in the right direction.”